

Psychodrama in Portugal

An overview of its history, practice, and challenges

António-José Gonzalez

Accepted: 27 January 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract In this paper for the Zeitschrift für Psychodrama und Soziometrie (ZPS), the beginnings of psychodrama in the Portuguese-speaking community are visited, giving relevance to the history of the two psychodrama training organizations in Portugal and their cooperation. References are made to publishing works about psychodrama and sociodrama's practice, theory, and research. The last sections of the paper address the challenges brought by the pandemic situation to the traditional settings of group psychotherapy and psychodrama and bring some reflections on the future of our shared practice as psychodramatists.

Keywords Psychodrama · Sociodrama · Portugal · Therapy during pandemic · Digital group therapy

✉ António-José Gonzalez
ISPA – Instituto Universitário, Lisboa, Portugal
E-Mail: gonzalez@ispa.pt

Psychodrama in Portugal

Ein Überblick über Geschichte, Praxis und Herausforderungen

Zusammenfassung Dieser Artikel für die Zeitschrift für Psychodrama und Soziometrie (ZPS) blickt auf die Anfänge des Psychodramas in der portugiesischsprachigen Gemeinschaft zurück. Dabei wird vor allem die Geschichte der beiden Psychodrama-Ausbildungsorganisationen in Portugal und ihre Zusammenarbeit gewürdigt. Es wird ein Überblick über die Arbeiten zur Praxis, Theorie und Forschung des Psychodramas und des Soziodramas in Portugal verwiesen. Die letzten Abschnitte des Papiers befassen sich mit den Herausforderungen, die die Pandemiesituation für die traditionellen Settings der Gruppenpsychotherapie und des Psychodramas mit sich bringt, und stellen einige Überlegungen zur Zukunft unserer gemeinsamen Praxis als Psychodramatiker*innen an.

Schlüsselwörter Psychodrama · Soziodrama · Portugal · Therapie während der Pandemie · Digitale Gruppentherapie

1 A short history of psychodrama in Portugal

During the decades of psychodrama creation and development, Portugal was living under its dictatorship regime. From the military coup that ended the First Republic in 1926 until 1974, the year of Moreno's death, spontaneity, creativity, development of human potential through creativity, and similar terms and concepts would sound too revolutionary to be accepted by the regime. So, psychodrama in the Portuguese language had its start in Brazil, where Pierre Weil, following the training received in France by Anne Ancelin Schützenberger, not only started training Brazilian psychodramatists but also published some of the first books and papers on the subject in our language (Schützenberger 1998).

To our knowledge, Pierre Weil and Anne Ancelin Schützenberger directed the first Triadic Psychodrama training in Portugal, shortly before the Carnage Revolution freed the country from the fascist dictatorship, censorship, and misery. Were Moreno himself to write a chapter about this chronological coincidence, using his “poetic and psychodramatic truth” rather than the “historical truth”, and indeed this psychodrama/sociodrama training in Portugal would sound like having a role in the change from a submission cultural conserve into a liberty *locus nascendi*.

What we do know is that these encounters did not go on, that during the 70s, there were a couple of visits of Zerka Moreno to Portugal and Spain during some European tours, and formal training in psychodrama had to wait until the beginning of the 80s, when Alfredo Correia Soeiro, one of the organizers of the 5th International Psychodrama Congress, in São Paulo, started a group in Porto, Portugal, with 12 psychiatrists. Some of them would, in 1986, found the Portuguese Society of Psychodrama (SPP, Sociedade Portuguesa de Psicodrama). SPP has more than 600 members nowadays, mainly psychologists, psychiatrists, and health professionals, primarily nurses (training in psychodrama is available for psychiatrists, psycholo-

gists, and psychotherapists only, while training in sociodrama is open to other health-connected professionals).

SPP has been active since then, and in 2022 it will have its 15th congress. Every two years, these congresses bring together a solid Portuguese community of psychodramatists and sociodramatists (with the very active participation of colleagues from the Portuguese Society of Group Psychoanalytical Psychodrama and some international guests) in a simultaneously playful and professional ambiance that contributes to a strong communal spirit.

SPP has organized several international meetings, namely the 1st Portuguese-Brazilian Psychodrama meeting (1994), the 3rd and 11th Iberian Congresses of Psychodrama (2001 and 2017), the 4th Regional Mediterranean IAGP Congress (2012), and the 1st and 7th International Sociodrama Conferences (2007, 2021—online). Most of them had a close collaboration between the two associations. Dozens of workshops, encounters, public psychodramas, and meetings, some of them online during the pandemic, are routinely organized by SPP, not only for psychodramatists and sociodramatists but open to the general community.

In 1990, the Portuguese Society of Group Psychoanalytical Psychodrama (SPPPG, Sociedade Portuguesa de Psicodrama Psicanalítico de Grupo) was created, with the participation of members from Soeiro's initial trainees' group. Like other European societies of the kind, their training combines the classical morenian influences with the psychoanalytical perspective. Together with SPP, they are the only psychodrama training societies in Portugal. There are now around 70 active members of this society. SPPPG has organized dozens of events, congresses, workshops, lectures, public psychodramas, national and international, and has kept offering seminars and webinars online since the beginning of the pandemic.

The continuous cooperation between these institutions and their associates creates an atmosphere of co-creation, mutual learning, and mutual stimulation. Mostly all main events of psychodrama in Portugal have participants from both organizations.

2 Psychodrama training in Portugal

Today, it is possible to be trained in Psychodrama in Portugal in either of the referred societies, and in Sociodrama in SPP. Over the last years, at least one has had an ongoing training program. Both are recognized by the Portuguese Psychologists Association and follow the criteria of the European Federation of Psychologists Associations and/or FEPTO (Federation of European Psychodrama Training Organisations).

Both societies demand trainees have therapeutic experience in a group as participants for two years. Training goes on in different modalities, but at the end of the process, every new psychodramatist will have at least 550h of training, which can go up to 900 if supervision training hours and attendance at scientific events are considered.

In several universities and higher education institutes, both psychodrama and sociodrama are taught and/or used as part of the curriculum. In some of them,

students do their research and write their dissertations about these subjects, namely about the impact of psychodrama as a therapy.

3 The practice of psychodrama and sociodrama

In Portugal, psychodrama and sociodrama are practiced not only in private institutions and clinics. In several Portuguese cities (Lisboa, Porto, Coimbra, Vila Franca de Xira, among others), psychodrama and, in some cases, sociodrama are offered in primary health centers, therapeutic communities, and hospitals.

In most of the cases, the setting is group psychodrama, although individual psychodrama and couple's psychodrama is offered too. The number of groups and their distribution throughout the country has been growing, and nowadays it is possible to find a group in several of the main Portuguese cities.

This is a clear recognition of its efficacy and benefits for the participants. In some of these institutions, impact measures and research are implemented to ensure good practice and benefits for the participants. This aspect connects us to the next theme of this paper, research in psychodrama, one of the key features of the Portuguese landscape concerning Moreno's heritage in our country.

4 Publishing theory, practice, and research in psychodrama

SPP has been publishing its journal, *Psicodrama*, since 1994. It publishes essays, case studies, theoretical proposals, scientific research, historical documentation, and other papers dedicated to the world of psychodrama, sociodrama, and their professionals.

More recently, specially in the last decade and a half, several Portuguese psychodramatists, inspired by Gabriela Moita's focus on research during her presidency both of SPP and FEPTO's Research Committee, have been doing research connected to the scientific validation of psychodrama, and published in indexed international peer-reviewed journals. Part of these works is being done in order to contribute to the international effort of publishing empirically based research that systematically and consistently shows evidence of the efficacy of psychotherapies. Most of the researchers are or were members of FEPTO's Research Committee.

These papers are dedicated to different themes connected to psychodrama, like theoretical, conceptual and assessment issues (cf. Cruz et al. 2016, 2018; Gonzalez et al. 2021; Martins et al. 2022), applications of psychodrama (Pires et al. 2021; Fontoura et al. 2020; Moita and Wieser 2018; Santos et al. 2020; Vieira et al. 2013), or psychodrama efficacy studies (Gonzalez et al. 2018; Testoni et al. 2018).

5 Psychodrama in times of lockdown

Like almost all other human activities, psychodrama had to transform its *modus operandi* during the global lockdown from the beginning of 2020. In the beginning,

for many, it looked like the answer would be simply to stop and wait. It did not seem possible to do psychodrama without the live, bodily presence of the other members. Nevertheless, of course, human creativity and adaptability did not take long to find ways to overcome the situation (see in particular ZPS special issue dedicated to the theme of psychodrama in times of Corona) (Forum 2021; Gonzalez 2021).

Lockdown consequences included increasing experiences of isolation, bringing enhanced levels of anxiety, stress, post-traumatic stress, depression, fear, panic, emotional instability, and other symptoms (Brooks et al. 2020; Usher et al. 2020). With the “zoomification” of lives, videoconference became the “new normal”, and group psychotherapy soon adapted to screens¹. It also became clear that not only was group therapy possible in an online context, but it was a moral demand that therapists should do their best to break isolation and bring relief to people, visiting their houses and bringing therapy there, in a most novel situation.

From the specific experience of our therapeutic team, being both psychodramatists and playbackers, creativity was enhanced by the fact that we were learning simultaneously from both communities. Playback Theatre (PT), being a theatrical form directly inspired by psychodrama, shares the use of the body and the dramatization to revisit the protagonist/teller’s experiences, and through concretization (Kushnir and Orkibi 2022) and symbolization, it makes it possible to offer new perspectives to crystallized experiences, with therapeutic benefits (Kowalsky et al. 2019, 2021; Gonzalez et al. 2022).

Spontaneity hence opens its transformation potential to the participants in the process. The PT community was extremely active in adapting to this new pandemic situation. After a few weeks of quarantine, online PT presentations started to bring the cinematic assumption (it is still theatre, but cinema became an inspiration, and the relation to the camera, perspective, the use of props, and light effects, among others, were seen as an opportunity of learning and new achievements for the comprehension and transformation of the tellers’ narratives).

Directly or indirectly, these learnings changed our way of looking at psychodrama. And so did our reflections about what was still missing. Creativity and spontaneity kept being part of the core of psychodrama practice. The most basic techniques, considered “pure” in the sense that they bring to the stage material directly from the protagonist’s inner world (role reversal and soliloquies) (see Cruz et al. 2018), kept bringing their immense potential to the stage², and the dramatization.

Psychodrama still works if participants are not together in the same room. Of course, it became clear that an additional effort to create the safer place possible at each participant’s home had to be made. Moreover, in some cases, psychodrama happened with some people in the group room and others participating from their homes, with some additional technical efforts done by the therapeutic team.

¹ Even the popular series “Group”, inspired by Irvin Yalom’s works on Group Psychotherapy and specifically in his novel “The Schopenhauer Cure”, adapted to the new reality, and the second season showed the group members interacting in a videoconference situation.

² Even some of the videoconference programs started to offer the possibility of a virtual stage. In the case of the Zoom platform, the “Spotlight for everyone” option became available months after the massive use of the platform, especially by theatre groups, brought feedback on the need for this functionality.

We realized how important rituals are, especially if we want to experience the magic of the surplus reality Moreno offered us—making it clear that we are in the group context, that our new circle must have this trusting atmosphere, and that now this implies that everyone, in their homes, guarantees not only a safe space for them (and we know that is not a possibility, in some homes) but to the rest of the group. That was especially important at the beginning, when some of these new rules were being (re)created. And then, when the warming up would lead to the dramatization phase, and the protagonist(s) and auxiliary egos would “jump” to the stage, it was essential to make sure that everyone else was there, active, watching, relating to the scene, ready to jump in if necessary, and opened to all the echoes and impacts the dramatization would have on them.

To our knowledge, the Portuguese community (although some exceptions of groups that paused during the whole quarantine phases, some of them having even definitely ceased) could adapt to the new demands for a digital version of psychodrama. After some weeks or months of pause, specific training sessions were offered, and many groups continued to meet online. Some of them go on online until the present day.

6 The present of psychodrama in Portugal

The Portuguese community of psychodramatists and sociodramatists is collaborative, creative, and growing. As said before, although there are some therapists using the monodrama setting, the most common situation in Portugal is psychodrama being done in group settings. Training is happening in an organized and systematic way, led by recognized experts. Annual congresses on psychodrama and sociodrama attract not only professionals, but lay audience and newcomers. Psychodrama is present in National Health institutions, academia, and civil society. Several supervision groups are currently going on, led by TEP associates from both societies.

At the heart of this recognition by the Portuguese society, we would put a case of a successful encounter, or encounters. Both the Brazilian and the European schools of psychodrama shaped the first generation of Portuguese psychodramatists. Although the first training only included psychiatrists, psychologists and other therapists soon enlisted the training and joined the ranks of the morenian troupe. The diversity of this collective of innovative group therapists opened many doors, both in public and private health institutions.

The presence of two cooperating societies created an ambiance of learning and continuous challenge, allowing for several training, learning, and sharing events every year throughout the last couple of decades. Efforts to develop and publish research on the efficacy of psychodrama brought an extra sense of security, not only to the community of participants/clients but to the practitioners themselves. Psychodrama is well recognized among the other main psychotherapeutic systems offered in Portugal, including psychoanalytic, systemic and family, cognitive-behavioral, gestalt, integrative, existential, among others. Societies and schools that organize congresses and training for psychotherapists frequently invite members of psychodrama societies and are invited by them.

In the short narrative offered in this paper about psychodrama in Portugal, if there is a single term that has to be chosen to underline the vibrant and creative community of the morenian troupe, it can be no other than diversity. Diversity to be continued and developed in the following years.

7 Final comments: And now, what?

The third decade of the XXI century started with a worldwide challenge that brought our shared human need to be in groups to the front row of our attention. In addition, in most countries, the issue of mental and emotional health has become a clear priority. In Portugal, like in other western countries, the public demand for psychotherapy, be it in clinical situations or not, made it clear that we need more of these services and professionals, most specifically in the national health system. In the case of psychodrama, new groups started, and people more and more look for contexts led by well-prepared professionals, where expression, using not only the more conventional sharing through verbal communication but also through other means that have been put in the second plan by our culture, is highlighted and facilitated.

These times and challenges brought another huge certainty: that science is a central part of our answer as psychotherapists, if we want to contribute to the enhancing of our communities' and individuals' health. The Portuguese researchers in the area of psychodrama's efficacy and specificities as a psychotherapy will keep being a part of its development in the country.

People increasingly look for places where spontaneity, creativity, and expressive communication are promoted. The use of our body and the attention given to the subtle forms of communication it brings, be it when we observe others or when they observe us, can help us achieve these goals. The idea of the stage being used not passively as a spectator but actively, either as a protagonist or an auxiliary ego, can be seen as a prompt to new uses of this amazing self-knowledge tool that we underuse: our own body and its creative and communicative potentials.

Additionally, psychodrama and sociodrama share a view about the participants that underlines an essential feature of its perspective regarding the human being and the groups: we work not with patients but with protagonists: the "ones who go to the fight" if we follow the Greek etymology of the word. This characteristic is sometimes forgotten, but it makes an enormous difference: people (and the groups where they live) are the agents of their own change. In our world of "prêt-à-porter" solutions, putting each one of the participants in a situation where they must nourish their own spontaneity, creativity, and braveness is something we should not forget when presenting the particular features of psychodrama and Sociodrama in the realm of psychotherapies and group intervention instruments.

Psychodrama was created in the context of the "Theatre of Spontaneity", founded by Moreno one century ago. In his book with the same name (Moreno 2010), he urges us to reinvent theatre as provocation of the cultural conserve. The last decades have shown immense literature that shows how therapies inspired by the creative arts—where we like to situate psychodrama—have become an efficient alternative to the more traditional therapeutic forms (Shafir et al. 2020).

New times demand new answers. We now know, concerning psychodrama, things we did not dare to think about before: it can be practiced in a group, even if every single member is at their home. It can go on, even if every participant has half of their face covered by a mask. A member that is sick and in need of feeling the comfort of the group can participate from home, while the others are together in the usual group room.

The psychodrama community can be proud of the adaptations it made in order to keep offering participants its circle, its stage, its welcoming and reassurance rituals. What it does not dismiss are its very basics: encounter and spontaneity. All the rest can be reinvented in every single session.

Funding Open access funding provided by FCTIFCCN (b-on).

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Brooks, S., Webster, R., Smith, L., Woodland, L., Wessely, S., Greenberg, N., & Rubin, G. (2020). The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence. *The Lancet*, 395(10227), 912–920. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30460-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30460-8).
- Cruz, A. S., Dias Sales, C. M., Moita, G. et al. (2016). Towards the development of Helpful Aspects of Morenian Psychodrama Content Analysis System (HAMPCAS). *Z Psychodrama Soziom*, 15(Suppl 1), 57–67. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11620-015-0314-9>.
- Cruz, A., Sales, C., Alves, P., & Moita, G. (2018). The core techniques of Morenian psychodrama: a systematic review of literature. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 1263. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01263>.
- Fontoura, M., Vieira, F. M., & Alves, D. (2020). Eu gosto é do verão: psicodrama com adolescentes nas férias de verão [What I do like is the summer: psychodrama with adolescents on summer holidays]. *Revista Brasileira de Psicodrama*, 28(1), 41–53. <https://doi.org/10.15329/2318-0498.19676>.
- Forum (2021). *Zeitschrift für Psychodrama und Soziometrie*, 20(1), 159–186. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11620-021-00592-2>.
- Gonzalez, A.-J. (2021). Losing my senses in digital Psychodrama. *Zeitschrift für Psychodrama und Soziometrie*, 20(1), 161–162. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11620-021-00592-2>.
- Gonzalez, A., Martins, P., & Lima, M. P. (2018). Studying the efficacy of psychodrama with the hermeneutic single case efficacy design: results from a longitudinal study. *Frontiers in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01662>.
- Gonzalez, A.-J., Martins, P., Lima, M. P., & Rosado, A. (2021). Análise das qualidades psicométricas da versão portuguesa do Inventário de Avaliação da Espontaneidade. *Psico-USF*, 26, 83–95. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1413-8271202126nesp09>.
- Gonzalez, A.-J., Xavier, T., Amarante, N., Barros, R., Amaral, B., Bernardino, M., & Lima, M. (2022). Playback theatre: group, stories, and stage as elements of change. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 81, 101968. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2022.101968>.
- Kowalsky, R., Keisari, S., & Raz, N. (2019). Hall of mirrors on stage: an introduction to psychotherapeutic playback theatre. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 66, 101577. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2019.101577>.
- Kowalsky, R., Raz, N., & Keisari, S. (2022). *An introduction to psychotherapeutic playback theatre*. Routledge.

- Kushnir, A., & Orkibi, H. (2021). Concretization as a mechanism of change in psychodrama: procedures and benefits. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 633069. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.633069>.
- Martins, P., Gonzalez, A.-J., Pedroso de Lima, M., & Rosado, A. (2022). Psychometric properties of the spontaneity assessment inventory-revised (SAI-R): the 3-factor hypothesis. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 19*(13), 7924. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19137924>.
- Moita, G., & Wieser, M. (2018). The dictatorship of love relationships: exploring the love model in psychodrama. *Zeitschrift für Psychodrama und Soziometrie, 17*, 21–32. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11620-017-0425-6>.
- Moreno, J.-L. (2010). *The theatre of spontaneity*. The North-West Psychodrama Association.
- Pires, N., Rojas, J., Sales, C., & Vieira, F. (2021). Therapeutic mask: an intervention tool for psychodrama with adolescents. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 588877. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.588877>.
- Santos, F., Cunha, P., Simões, M., & Cruz, A. (2020). Assertiveness competencies in the intimate relationship: proposal for an eclectic approach. *Zeitschrift für Psychodrama und Soziometrie, 19*(Suppl 1), 83–100. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11620-020-00564-y>.
- Schützenberger, A. A. (1998). Draft pre-history of psychodrama in Western Europe. *Psicodrama, Revista da Sociedade Portuguesa de Psicodrama, 5*, 7–24.
- Shafir, T., Orkibi, H., Baker, F.-A., Gussak, D., & Kaimal, G. (2020). Editorial: the state of the art in creative arts therapies. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 68. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00068>.
- Testoni, I., Cecchini, C., Zuliana, M., Guglielmin, M., Ronconi, L., Kirk, K., Berto, F., Guardigli, C., & Cruz, A. (2018). Psychodrama in therapeutic communities for drug addiction: a study of four cases investigated using idiographic change process analysis. *The Arts in Psychotherapy, 61*, 10–20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2017.12.007>.
- Usher, K., Bhullar, N., & Jackson, D. (2020). Life in the pandemic: social isolation and mental health. *Journal of Clinical Nursing, 29*, 2756–2757. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.15290>.
- Vieira, F., Torres, S., & Moita, G. (2013). Psicodrama e obesidade: desenvolvimento, implementação e avaliação de um programa de intervenção focado nas emoções. *Revista Brasileira de Psicodrama, 21*(2), 141–149. <https://www.revbrapsicodrama.org.br/rbp/article/view/342>.



António-José Gonzalez 1968, Ph.D., is an Auxiliary Professor and researcher at ISPA, University Institute in Lisbon. He is a member of the APPsy-CI (Applied Psychology Research Center Capabilities & Inclusion) research unit. TEP in the Portuguese Society of Psychodrama, he has directed therapeutic groups for more than 20 years. He was trained both in Psychoanalytical and Morenian Psychodrama. Coordinator of dISPArteatro, the theatre group of ISPA, and Projecto Eco, dISPAr's project on Playback Theatre. These groups have facilitated interventions and performances with very different populations. His research has focused on the efficacy of therapies, specifically Expressive Arts therapies. He published several papers in national and international journals.